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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were to analyze the effects of being a teacher-parent and to try to identify the knowledge and perspectives teacher-parents derived from the dual role that might be useful to teachers and parents with experience in just one role. The following issues were explored: (1) how parenting influenced teachers; (2) how teaching affected parenting; (3) themes of difficulty in the dual role; (4) differences in how men and women perceived the dual role; and (5) the use of teacher-parents' knowledge for parents and educators with experience in one role only. Subjects--50 female and male, white middle class teachers of elementary, middle, and high school students--were interviewed through a series of open-ended questions to determine their beliefs about the dual role. According to the data analysis, the major effect of parenting on teachers was a greater understanding of and empathy for the parents of their students. In addition, they developed a broadened perspective toward their own children. The main difficulty in the dual role for women was "exhaustion"; male teacher-parents did not find much that was hard in the dual role. Informants' suggestions formed the basis for recommendations including the use of teacher-parents to help educators without children understand how the vulnerability of parents can cause defensiveness, and to help in the development of programs to bridge the gaps of understanding that can develop between teachers and parents. (Contains 15 references.) (LL)

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TEACHING AND PARENTING: EFFECTS OF THE DUAL ROLE

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Teaching and Parenting: Effects of the Dual Role

Introduction/Objectives

This is a study of the relationship between teaching and parenting. It describes through an analysis of tape recorded interviews teachers' beliefs about the dual role. The study is based on an analysis of interviews with 50 elementary, middle and high school teachers.

The purposes of the study were (1) to analyze the effects of being a teacher-parent and (2) to try to identify the knowledge and perspective teaching-parents derived from the dual role which might be useful to teachers and parents with experience in just one role. The following issues were explored: (1) how parenting influenced the teachers; (2) how teaching affected parenting; (3) themes of difficulty in the dual role; (4) differences in how men and women perceive the dual role; (5) use of teaching-parents' knowledge for parents and educators with experience in one role only.

Perspectives/Theoretical Framework

While teaching and parenting are different experiences, they share common elements. We teach and nurture in each role. The settings we work in as teachers and mothers (leaving fathers aside for the moment) have similarities. The privacy (some have said loneliness) of the classroom is not unlike what Grumet (1988) has called the "exile of domesticity".

Although there seems to be sufficient overlap in teaching and parenting to warrant exploration, few studies directly on this subject have been reported. Kepler-Zumwalt (1986) noted the similarities and differences between being a beginning teacher and new mother. Studies which have examined the effects of parenting on teaching have been mainly confined to teachers of kindergarten through middle school. The positive effects of being a teaching-mother of kindergarten and elementary school students have been described (Claesson, 1986; Hulsebosch, 1990; Lightfoot, 1978; Seltz, 1972). Negative effects, such as unduly high expectations of their children and themselves were reported by Katz (1980) in a study of nursery kindergarten teaching mothers. Other negative effects of being a teaching parent are described by De Long (1986), McPherson (1972), Nias (1989) and Spencer (1986).

Lortie (1975) called teaching a unique kind of work because teachers work with "inherently changeful materials" (p. 136). But parents, too, contend with the changeful nature of children. "As soon as you figure out one stage, the child is well into another" (Sills & Henry, 1980, p.9). What people who both live and work with the changeful nature of children say about the dual experience is the focus of this study.

Method

I chose interviewing as a method of inquiry because I thought it would best capture the teachers' perceptions of the dual role. I share with Gilligan (1982) the view that "how people

talk about their lives is of significance, and the language they use and the connections they make reveal the world they see" (p.2). The interviews were guided by a set of prepared questions but also included the amplifications and digressions which teachers made to answer the questions as fully as they wished. My approach to interviewing is in the "new tradition", if that is not an oxymoron, of research interviewing (Mishler, 1986) in which the interviewee may discover meaning and understanding through the actual interview process.

The interviews were conducted in the teachers' schools and lasted approximately one hour. They were recorded on audiotape and transcribed by me. Since many of the questions were open-ended, they generated a variety of interpretations and responses. I have tried to capture what is distinctive in the teachers' voices as I looked for common patterns in their comments. Themes emerged from studying the data as in the "grounded theory" tradition of Glaser and Straus (1967) and the research interviewing approach of Mishler (1986).

Data Source: The Setting and the Subjects

The study took place in eight suburban schools within three school systems in the state of New Jersey. Fifty female and male, white, middle class teachers of elementary, middle and high school students volunteered to participate. They knew nothing about the study except that it concerned teaching and parenting. Collectively, the teachers have taught from three

to 30 years on grade levels one through 12. Most (90 per cent) were teachers before becoming parents and so could reflect on their teaching behavior before and after being in a parent role. They range in age from 35 to 55. Sixty per cent of the teachers are women. Ninety per cent are currently married, eight percent are divorced, and two percent are widowed. They have from one to five children of their own.

When the teachers are quoted, they are identified by their gender, subject or level at which they teach, and ages of their children (i.e. "a female high school English teacher with a 12 year old son").

Results

The major effect of parenting on the teachers was a greater understanding of and empathy for the parents of their students. A second effect of parenting on teaching, which I have called "affective/academic", concerned changes teachers described in their attitudes toward students and in their teaching behavior. A third effect, or the "social/home" category, refers to how the teachers' knowledge of their own children's home and social pressures enhanced their understanding of their students.

Three themes emerged from an analysis of what teachers said about the effects of teaching on parenting: (1) teachers believed they developed a broadened perspective toward their children; (2) they used their teaching knowledge with their

children ("teaching knowledge" includes six different categories of knowledge); (3) the patience expended in the classroom affected and sometimes depleted their reserve for their children.

The main theme of difficulty in the dual role, for women teachers, was "exhaustion". They contended with problems of having insufficient time for each role and feeling overwhelmed by the affective and intellectual demands of school and home.

On the issue of gender differences, since men constituted only 40 per cent of the interviewees, inferences about how they differ from women are tentative. Still, there were three patterns of difference between men and women.

(1) Men did not have find much that was hard in the dual role. Their chief complaint was "the paperwork" in teaching. Only one male teacher referred to the theme of exhaustion.

(2) For woman teachers, their experience as mothers exerted a greater influence on them as teachers than their teaching experience did on them as mothers. This is not to say that teaching did not influence their parenting. For male teachers teaching had a greater influence on their parenting than parenting had on their teaching. (3) When the teachers compared their lives to the parent of the same gender the following pattern emerged: Men have much more time to spend with their children than their fathers had for them while women have much less time with their children than their mothers had for them.

Conclusion/Implications

Being a teaching-parent does not generate formulaic knowledge, but the experience can change perspectives on teaching and relations with parents and students. Teaching-parents could be a resource to help parents better understand their children and the goals of teachers and administrators. They would have credibility with parents because of their parenting experience. They could be used to help educators without children understand how the vulnerability of parents can cause defensiveness. Teaching-parents could help in the development of programs to bridge the gaps of understanding than can develop between teachers and parents.

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